

8 January 1988

Notes enroute to ARDIS Symposium in Des Moines, Iowa and in anticipation of a Conference on Secrecy, Covert Action and Foreign Policy at Tufts in February, at which Colby, Clines, Hugh Tovar, Blaufarb (head of Phoenix), Tom Polgar and other CIAs will be present.

Pat said the other day that being at a conference with (and even reading papers by) NSC and DOD officials (a propos of Gregory Trevorton's tepid "critique" of covert action) was like sitting at a dinner table with a collection of child molesters and wife beaters.

But this conference will seat me in a row with a collection of mass murderers. And not even those with "top, overall state responsibilities," whether like Speer, Goering, McNamara or Rusk, or world-historical figures like Hitler, Stalin, or elected leaders like FDR or LBJ, but the highest level officials in direct charge of the process of mass murder or of its camp-level implementation: Himmler, Heydrich, Eichmann, Hoess.

On the other hand, what Milgram has taught me (which Pat still finds hard to believe) is that, whereas wife beaters and child molesters are a special fraction of the male population--perhaps not so small as we used to think, but a minority--those who took part in these murderous operations as part of a bureaucracy do not seem, on the whole, "special" or otherwise pathological or (initially, at least) morally warped by the standards of the general population.

"They must have been at least somewhat sadistic," says Pat. Not so, as far as Milgram, and studies of the Nazis backgrounds, indicate. Obedient, patriotic, loyal, conservative-reactionary, ambitious, yes...There are no signs that they enjoyed the human consequences of their official actions, though they were not much bothered by them: a learned indifference to these "irrelevant" considerations or "necessary" results that is characteristic of bureaucratic behavior.

Do I really believe this? Yes: a result of reading Milgram's studies--to which he does not draw attention--is that it becomes somewhat difficult, problematic, to judge such behavior on an individualistic basis, or the individuals themselves. (Or do we, should we, aspire to induce people to transcend such bureaucratic compulsions, by new education, by a system of exhortation, example, laws, punishment, stigma and honors: as distinct from somehow coming to understand these systems better and changing them?)

At least, with the system what it is and has been, these individuals look like civil servants, officials, who happened to have been in a bureaucracy at the time, and in the situation,

when it was ordered to commit mass murder. They behaved pretty much as anyone in their circumstances would have: they did it.

"But they chose those jobs," says Pat. But--as in the Milgram experiments--mass murder, torture, the destruction of democratic polities, were not in the job description for which, in effect, they answered an ad. They really did not expect these assignments (for the most part). Nor were these part of their early career experience. As in the experiments, they became accustomed to a setting of authority and a pattern of career expectations that seemed quite legitimate, well before their orders turned ugly.

"But some of these men gave the orders, invented the programs." True. Milgram himself suggests that there is a distinguishable class of actors, represented by the Experimenter in his own (sic) experiment, whose motives he did not study or theorize. He refers to bosses who give (real) orders of the nature his supposed Experimenter does as "malevolent authority," a menacing figure in his conclusions, since he found that such a boss is as likely to be obeyed by ordinary subordinates as one whose motives or commands are benign.

But it is Milgram's finding that subordinates who--in the course of "following orders" obediently--behave in a way that is obviously destructive of other humans are not necessarily "malevolent" in any usual sense. Should we take for granted his own evident assumption that those who give the orders are significantly different in this respect? Some may be, of course; if "malevolence" means anything at all, some leaders or bosses might be malevolent, just as some subordinates can be sadistic; but is this necessary for the behavior to emerge in certain circumstances?

Such leaders, let us assume, do not have the "excuse," the rationalization, the motive that they are "simply following orders, obeying a boss." Yet they may feel scarcely more "free"--hence, scarcely more "personally responsible"--for their policies and choices or their consequences than one of their high-level, or even low-level subordinates: given their sense of "responsibilities" that go with the job, their "mandate," mission, cause, task, criteria of success and failure, along with prevailing circumstances, available alternatives, all of which can seem "given" within the time "available." And for that matter, none of them are without bosses entirely, constituents, sponsors, voters, contributors, and bureaucratic and political rivals, on whom their job tenure (even for dictators), or (for most others) possibilities of advancement depend. (See Richard Neustadt's discussions of the "personal stakes" for Presidents, the people and considerations that influence his "terms and conditions of employment," just as for any subordinate).

The inference or judgment about some of these bosses of Murder, Incorporated, parallel to that about their subordinates, might be: They were in a particular position of authority at the time when other, less murderous, means of fulfilling their mission had failed, or looked surely inadequate, and there was no time to try to invent wholly new approaches that would avoid the "defects" of the ones in question and that would work as well. They picked up and directed this "evil...but lesser evil" approach with the same qualms--painful at first, but not paralysing--as their subordinates all down the line carried out their orders.

"I didn't like it any more than you would," they say afterwards. "But you would have done the same in my position." The last comment, said face to face, may be meant as a compliment, a mark of recognition and respect, as much as a self-justification. And (to say this is not more of an insult, or more invidious, than when Milgram says something comparable to his readership) they may be right.

Suppose, at any rate, that one believed this about this American administrators of programs that carried out the individual torture or murder of scores of thousands to (in Indonesia) hundreds of thousands of murders of non-combatant, many women and children? What would follow? What might one say to an audience in their presence?

Perhaps this, for one thing: starting tactfully. When I had the opportunity to pass on to some of the Directors of the Nicaraguan government in 1981 some observations based on my own experience as a counterrevolutionary analyst in the U.S. government, I mentioned that there were at least three ways that their enemies in the American Administration could succeed in their own terms, eliminating the challenge the Sandinistas represented to their sense of larger American interests.

They could overthrow the revolutionary regime by military means, paramilitary or (what would probably be required) American combat troops. Or by economic, military and covert pressures they could so punish the Nicaraguan population for the independence and policies of its regime that the people would eventually lose heart for the struggle, the regime would fall or rule without public support, and the example would deter other countries in the Third World from incurring the wrath of the US at such a price.

Or the Americans given the mission of "neutralizing" the Sandinistas or overthrowing them could try to achieve the latter result with the help of the Sandinista leaders themselves, in a kind of judo. By economic sabotage, terrorism, and psychological warfare they would seek to provoke the Nicaraguan regime into measures of repression, conceived as self-defense,

that would transform the society into a tightly-closed, Stalinist, repressive authoritarian society, that would lose public support and repel any potential imitators of its initial challenge to American hegemony.

Probably, I suggested, the three approaches would be used in tandem, for synergistic effect, in hopes that the measures the Sandinistas used to avoid military defeat would meanwhile bankrupt the economy, depress the standard of living (and burden the population with a draft) and force the regime in the third direction, along with dependence on Soviet and Cuban aid (just what the American Administration purported, disingenuously, to want to avoid).

My warnings were well founded. The joint American strategy--conceived and directed by Americans of the sort in this symposium (including myself, in the role I played in Vietnam)--has had disastrous effects on the lives of the Nicaraguan people, but it has not yet succeeded. Nor has it wholly failed.

Most of these men, somewhat older than I, came into their line of work when it was directed against Hitler, and then against Stalin. There is more than one way to lose a struggle against foes. One is to be conquered by them. The other is to become like them. To a dismaying extent, the legacy of World War II was a victory for Hitler: for some of his values, his beliefs, his "philosophy," his means.

The Covert Action Department of the CIA's Clandestine Services is the American SS. Its members have not volunteered with the desire and intention to do evil. Nor is everything that they do evil or even wrong in a moral sense. But (as in the historical SS) they have made themselves available to do anything at all that they are ordered. And a good part of what they are called upon to do is evil.

A bureaucratic institution that directs, manages and routinizes evil performances, reliably evoking them from ordinary patriotic Americans, should not be tolerated in American democracy.